

## VILLA MÜLLER: REVISITING THE WORK OF ADOLF LOOS<sup>1</sup>

Kent KLEINMAN, Leslie Van DUZER

### THE SUBJECTS OF THE 'RAUMPLAN'

Received: 13. 6. 1995

Keywords: Loos, House, Raumplan, Rationalism.

1. Leslie Van Duzer and Kent Kleinman have expanded on this material in a new book (1994).

There is widespread agreement on the status of Villa Müller (Prague, 1930) as both the final and the most complete example of Adolf Loos's *Raumplan*. However, in the interest of specificity, it is necessary to pause before covering the villa with labels. Loos himself never accorded the *Raumplan* a theoretical treatment in a dedicated essay. Indeed Loos never actually employed the term. An oblique reference, a footnote in a 1929 eulogy to the carpenter J. Veillich, is typically held to be the defining moment for the *Raumplan* concept.

This is the great revolution in architecture: the solution of the plan in space....Just as mankind will eventually succeed in playing chess in the cube, so too other architects will, in the future, solve the plan in space (Loos, 1929, 215).

The word itself was coined and circumscribed by H. Kulka in 1931, during an effort to compile the definitive *oeuvre complète* (Kulka, 1931, 43). In Kulka's text, the *Raumplan* became the efficient, emphatic, three-dimensional articulation of the program, restrained by the discipline of the prismatic shell. Loos echoed this definition in an interview given shortly before his death.

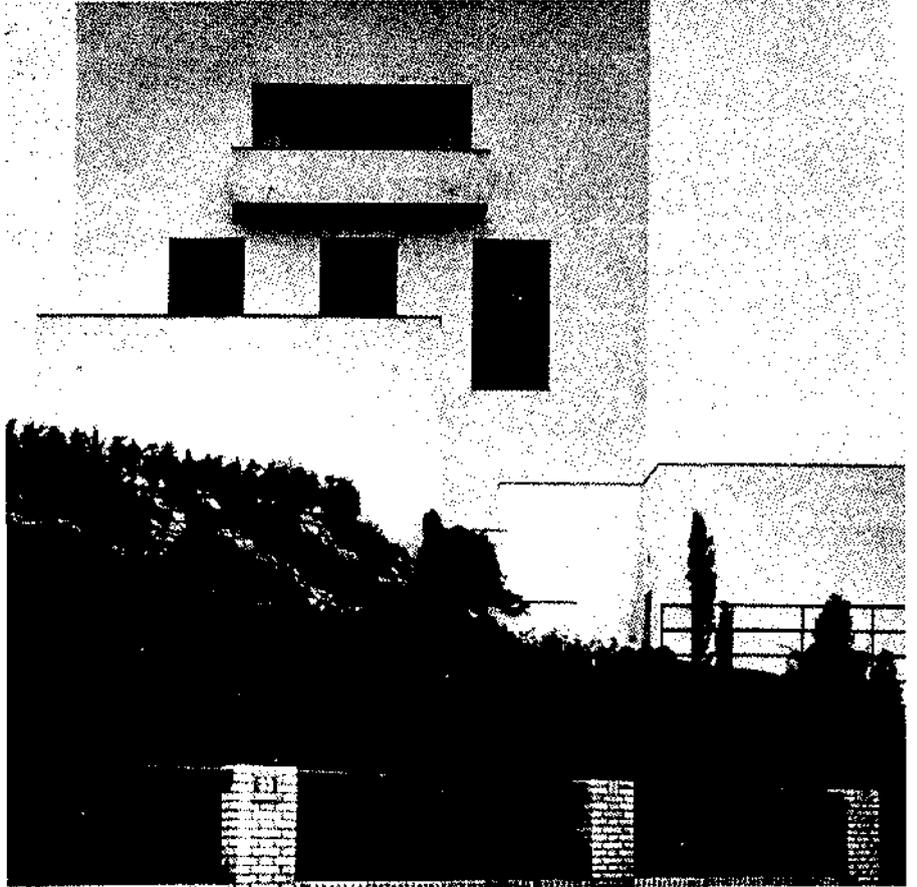
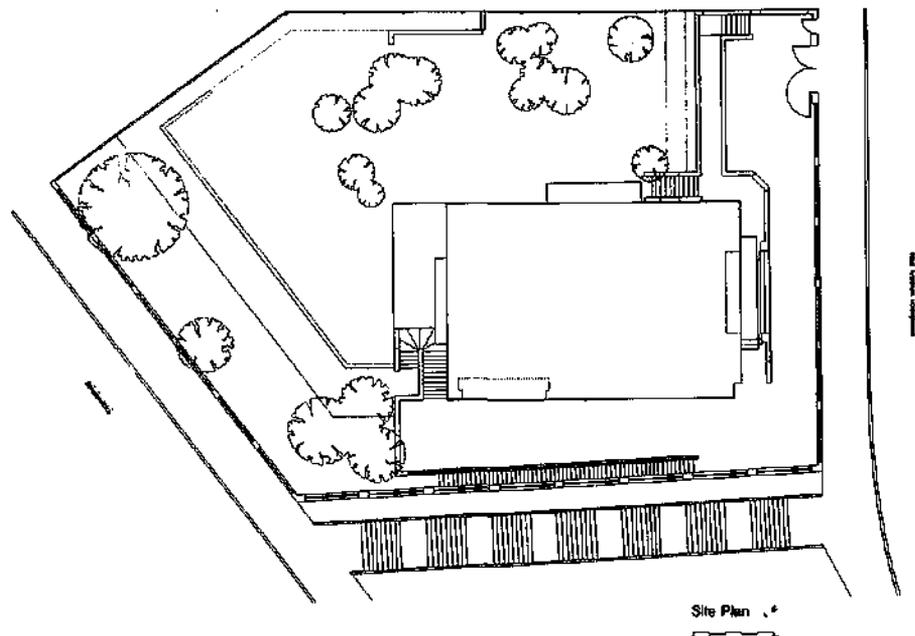


Figure 1. Villa Müller: Northern View  
(authors' photograph)

Figure 2. Villa Müller: Dining Room  
(authors' photograph)



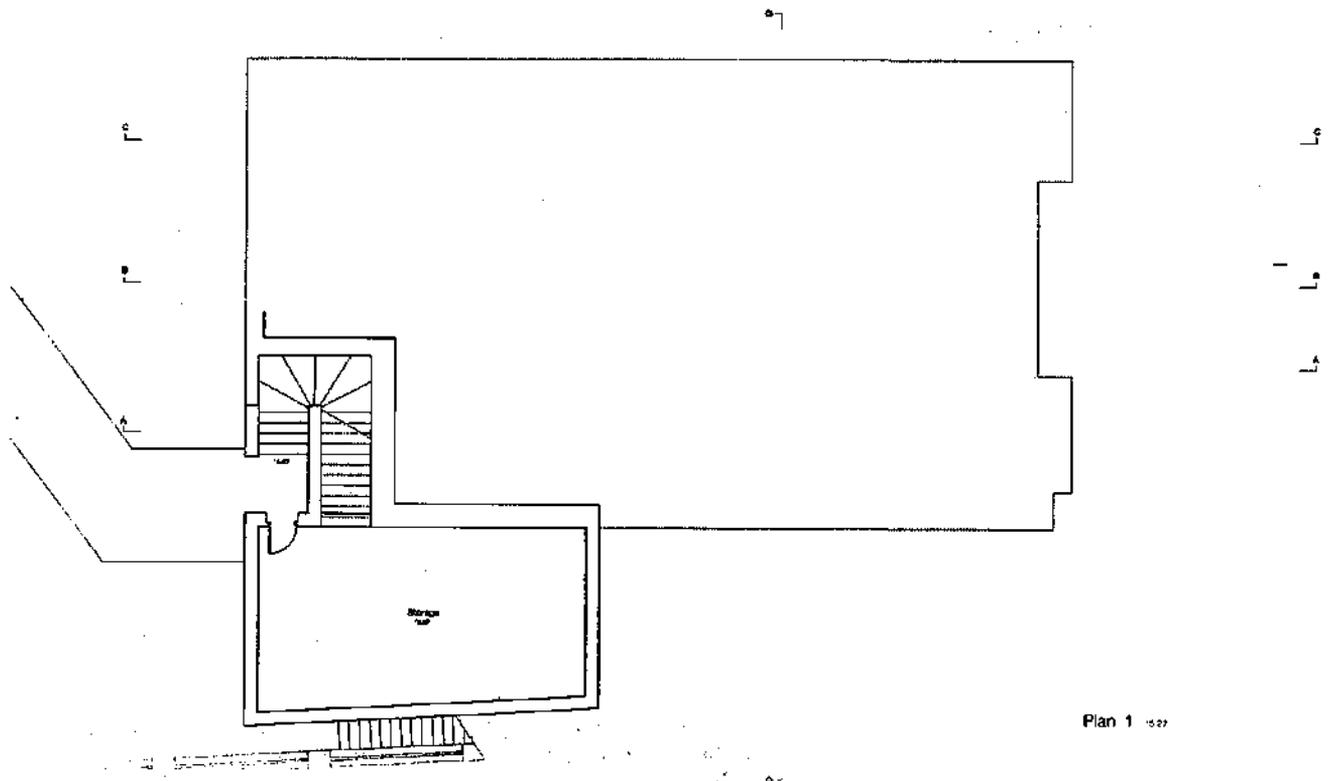
Figure 3. Villa Müller: Site Plan (authors' drawing).



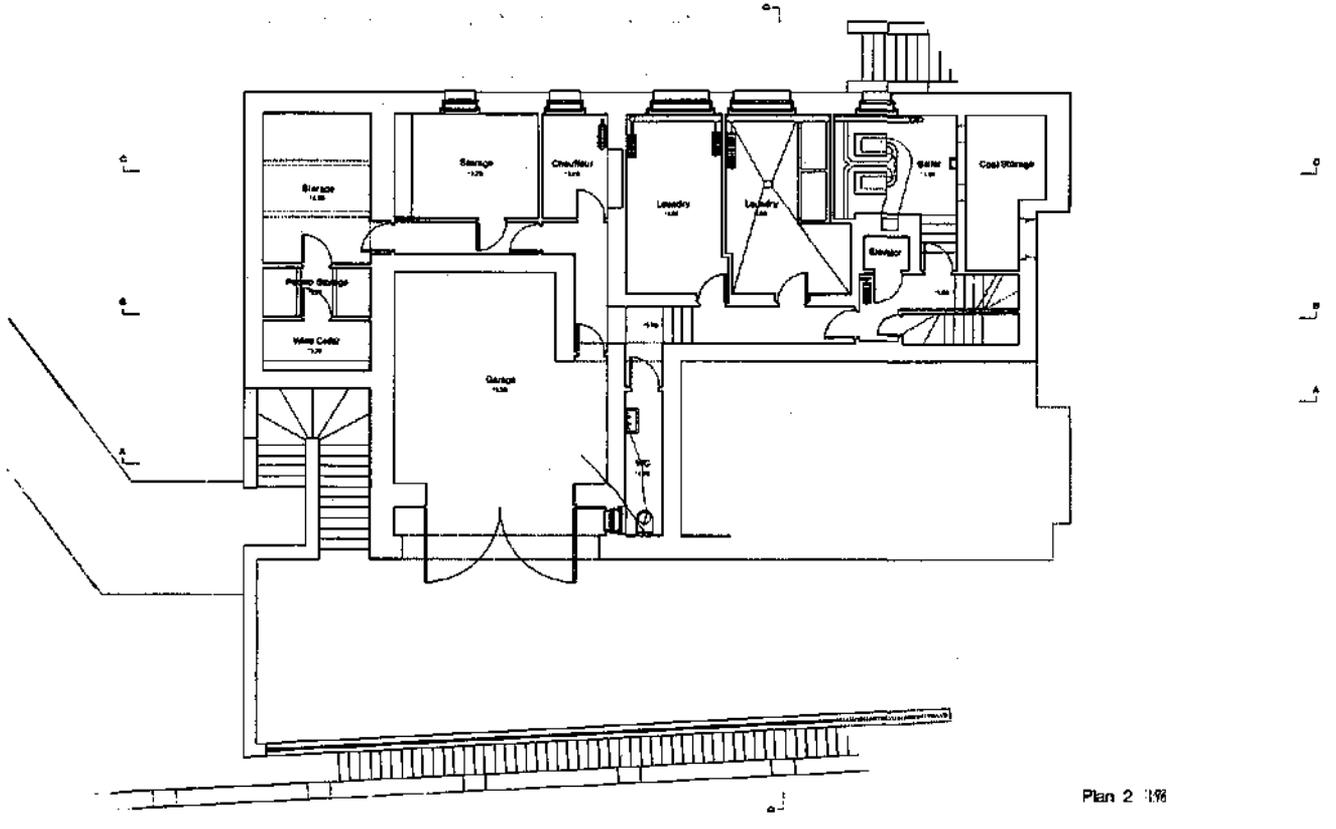
I do not design plans, facades, sections, I design space. Actually there is neither a ground floor, an upper floor or a basement, there are merely interconnected spaces, vestibules, terraces. Every room needs a specific height -- the dining room a different one from the pantry -- therefore the floors are on varying levels. After this one must connect the spaces with one another so that the transition is unnoticeable and natural, but also the most practical (Lhota, 1933, 143).

However, Villa Müller demonstrates clearly not only the three-dimensional expression of the domestic program at the core of the Loosian interior, but rather an enormous, and enormously productive, paradox. For the *Raumplan* houses not one, but two subjects, two competing conceptions of the inhabitant. One subject is stationary, the other subject roves. The subject at rest is housed by the emphatically-materialized, efficiently-sized, well-formed interior. Yet, as if two plays were being performed on the same stage at the same time, the Loosian program fully embraces another character, an equally single-minded but otherwise quite antithetical identity, one that paces incessantly. The first is defined in terms of arrival and stasis; the second in terms of trajectory and displacement. The crafted enclosures which nestle around the figure at rest are continually compromised by the presence of the agitated figure. Inversely, the restless figure is continually ensnared by the well-crafted enclosure. The interior oscillates between two contrary conditions. The fundamental incompatibility of the dual subjects and the ensuing tension between their respective architectures is arguably the defining quality of the villa's interior.

The domain of the stationary subject is the discrete room. To create a sense of enclosure for each room in the villa, Loos unabashedly employed traditional techniques of the discipline: simple geometric footprints, distinct cladding materials, room-specific local symmetries, proportions approaching simple whole number ratios, distinct sectional properties, individualized fenestration, bounded ceiling planes, and thresholds marking the points of entry. Together these technologies render each volumetric unit of the villa as a discernable interior. Thus, it is not surprising that Loos would employ hollow pilasters in the marble hall, or contrive symmetrical arrangements in the anteroom and dining room. The dwelling subject demands an intact interior, room by room.

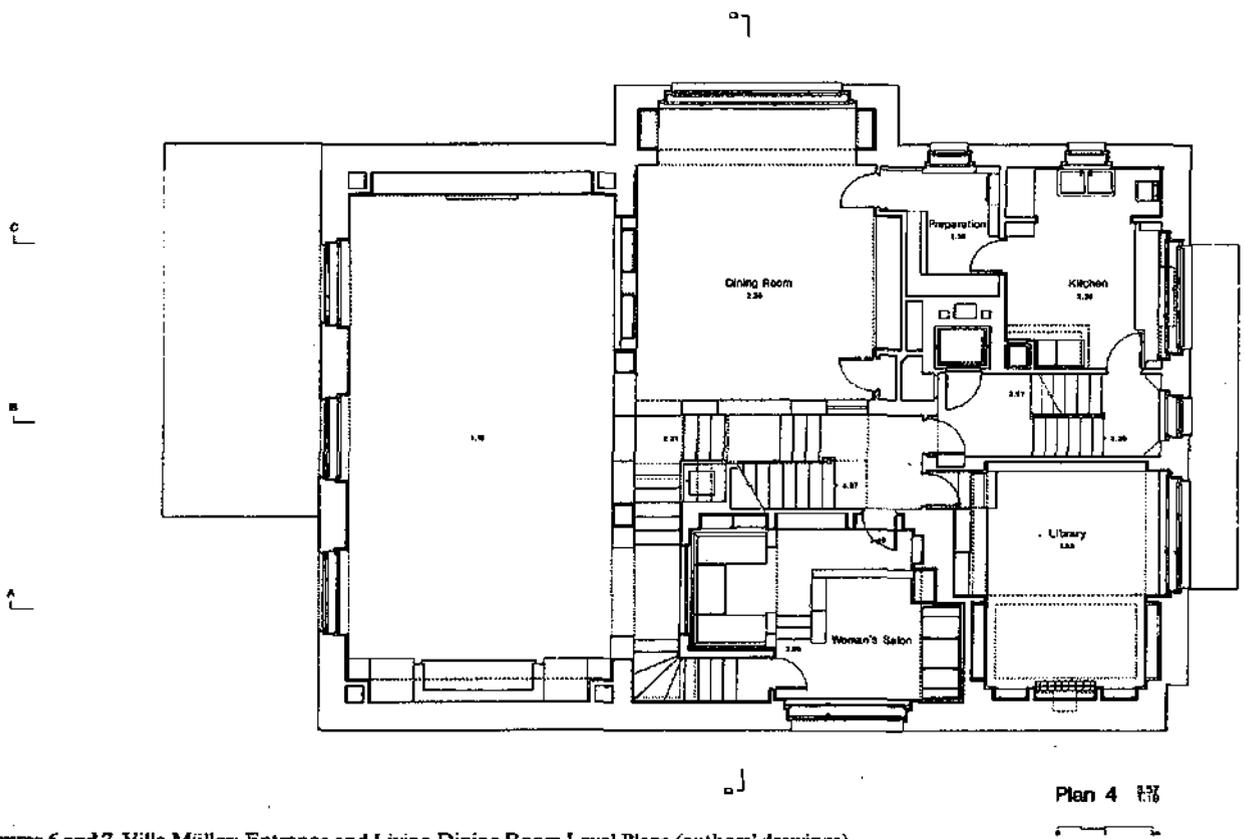
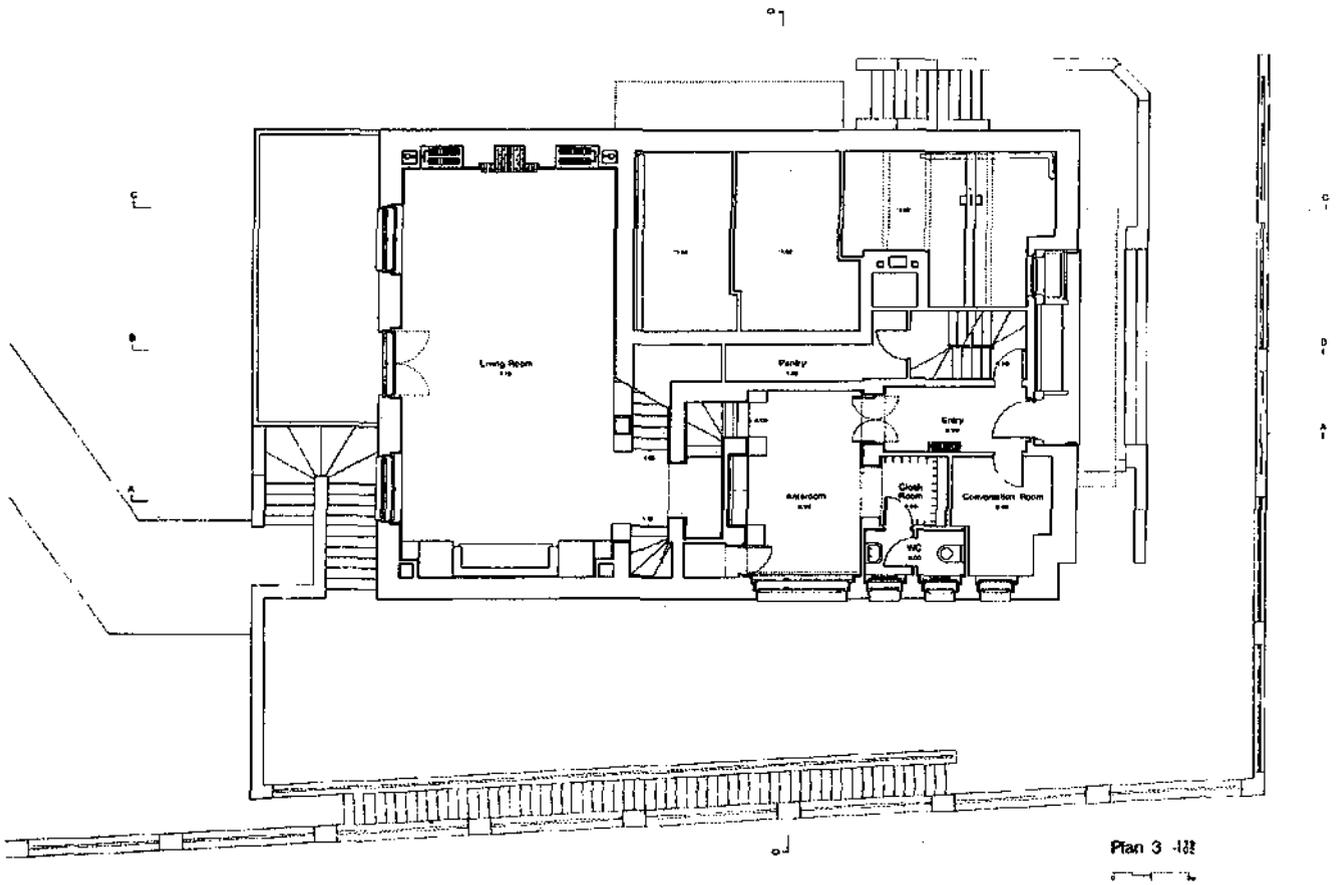


Plan 1 1527

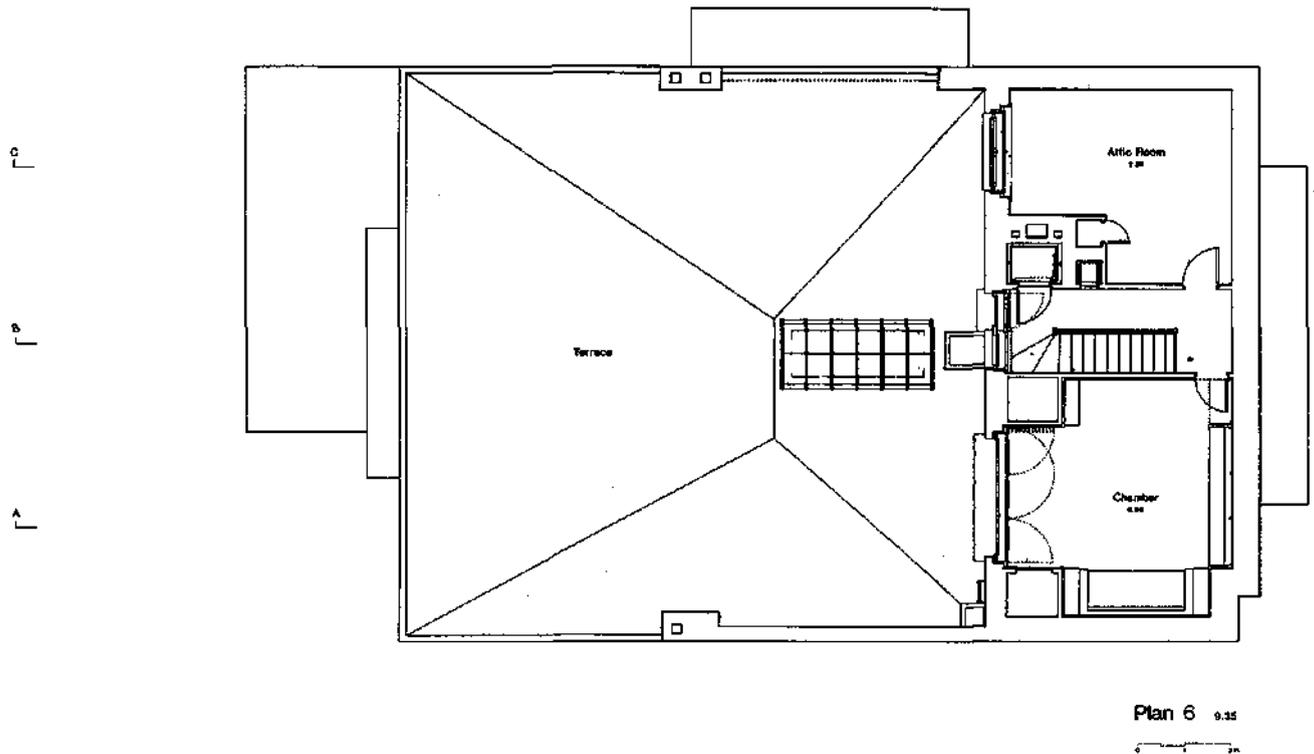
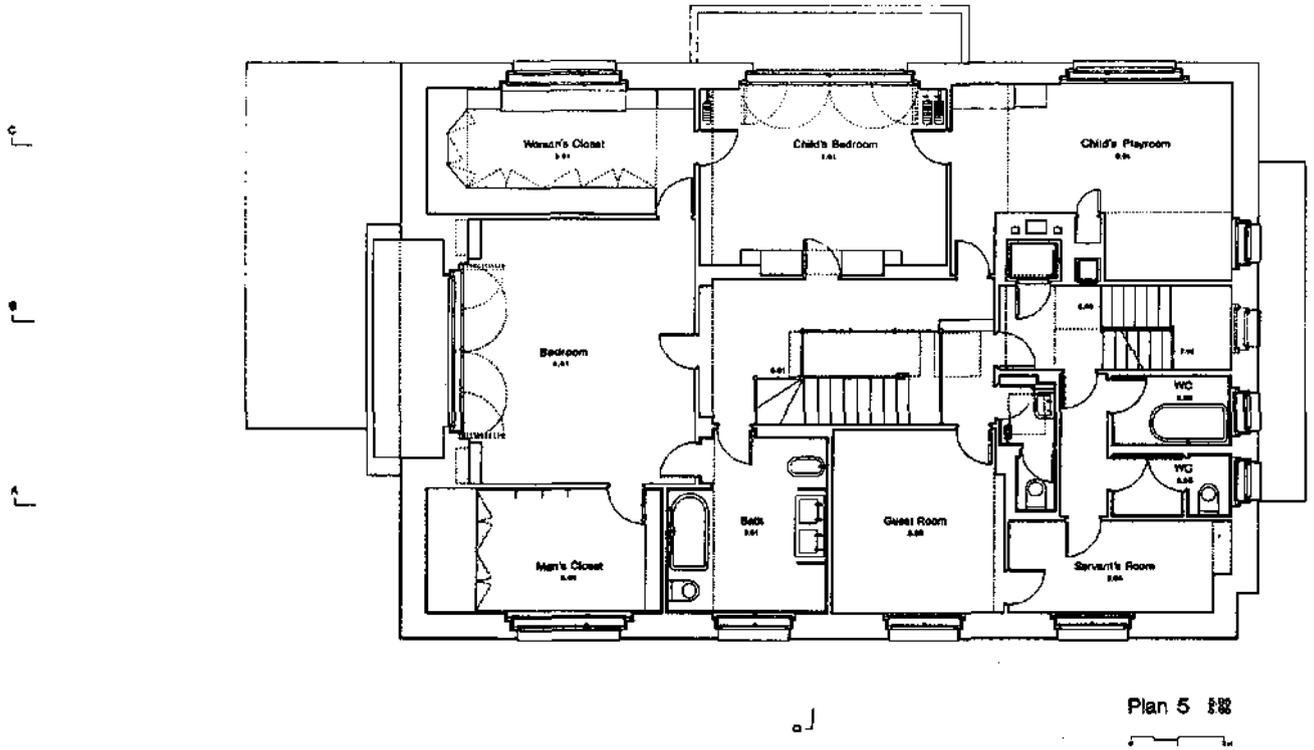


Plan 2 1528

Figures 4 and 5. Villa Müller: Basement and Garage Floor Plans (authors' drawings)



Figures 6 and 7. Villa Müller: Entrance and Living-Dining Room Level Plans (authors' drawings).



Figures 8 and 9. Villa Müller: Bedrooms and Terrace Level Plans (authors' drawings).

The room enticed dwelling by offering conventional lodging. The arrangement of the furniture contributed significantly to envelopment of the subject. Although Loos argued for the dispersal of furniture to the periphery of the room in what he called the 'Japanese style', the effect was not so much the expansion of the space as it was the creation of multiple enclaves. The arrangement of the furniture in the Villa Müller did not exploit the perforated edges of rooms. On the contrary, the gaze of the resting body was always centripetally disciplined. This is evident in the *boudoir* alcove, where the built-in seating conspicuously turns its back to the 'exterior' view of the marble hall, and in the dining room where the subject seated at the granite table is divorced from the drama that surrounds him. The miscellaneous chairs and tables that originally gathered around the built-in features were invitations for bodies to come, to fill out the circle, and to complete the final boundary of the interior.

But the dweller is not alone. Cutting across all the carefully-crafted conditions of enclosure, or more often along their sides, is the path of the roving subject. To rove is to be upright, and this uprightedness has its benefits. Only the roving subject is offered exterior views; the dweller never sits at the window. It is also the singular privilege of the elevated eye to gaze through rooms, to peer over penetrated boundaries, and to scan diagonally across space as the body navigates the sinuous channels of circulation. It is therefore quite ironic that precisely this landscape is the favored material for the most static of all viewers: the photographer. Virtually all images of the enclosure privilege the diagonal view. But behind each such image lies a clogged artery and an impatient pedestrian.

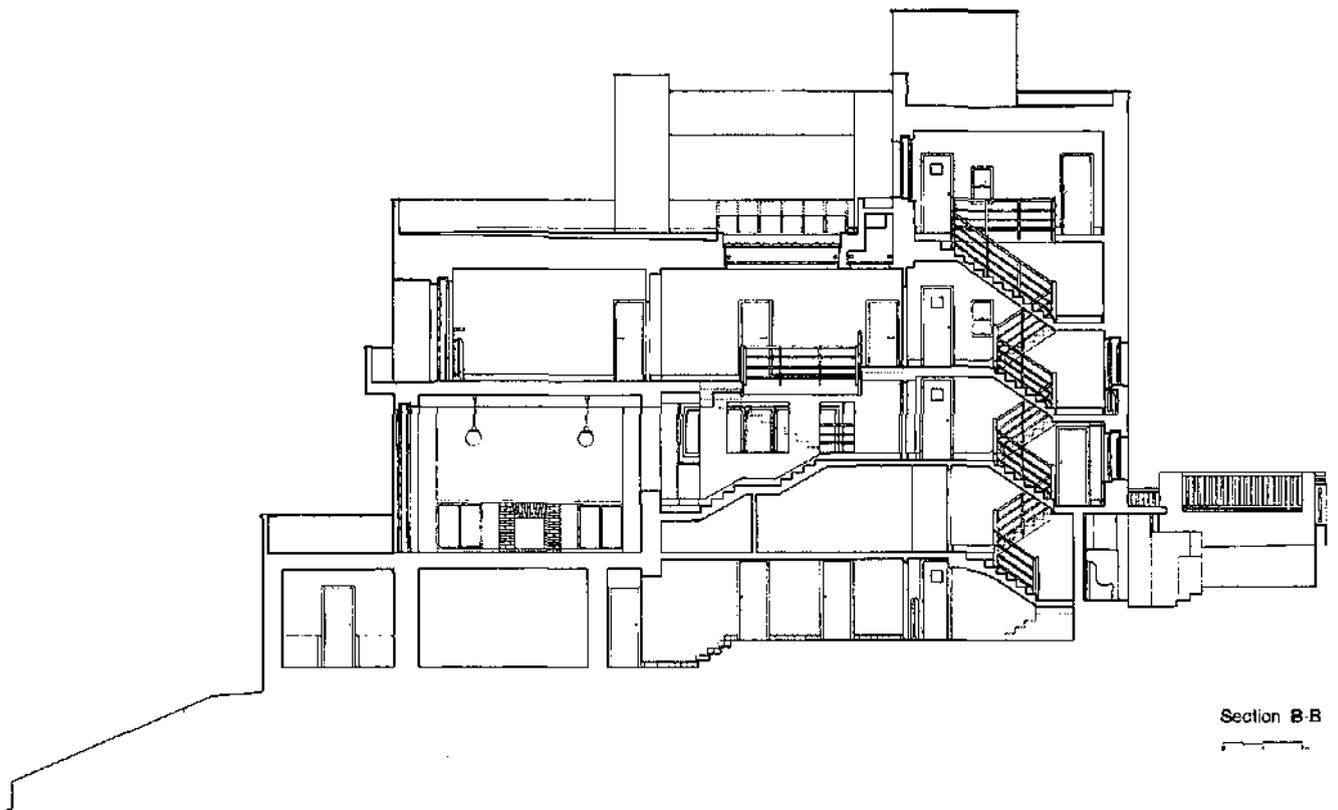
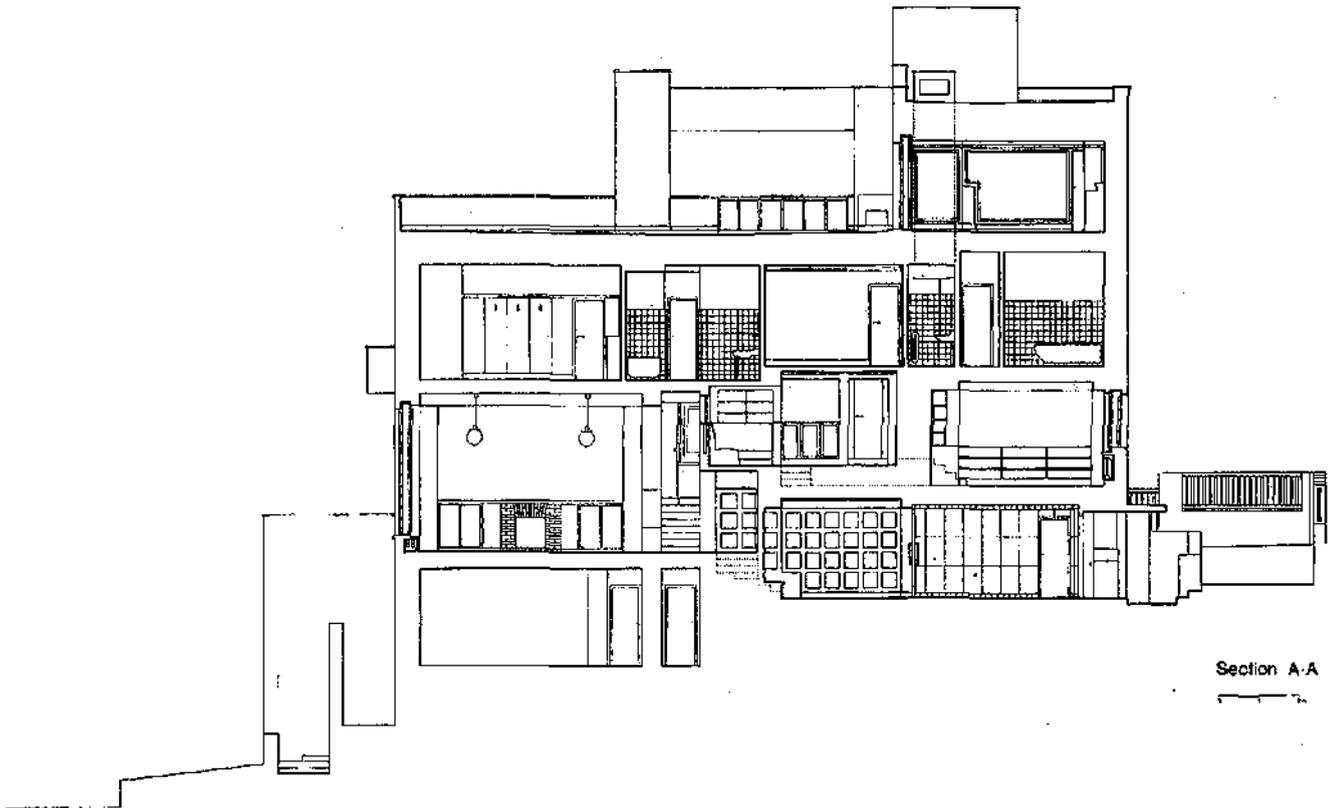
In Villa Müller, to rove is also to be displaced. There is a consistent distinction between the architecture of the room and the architecture of the path. Whereas Loos's rooms are constituted by symmetrical arrangements, the lines of movement are never aligned with the axes of these symmetries. Loos consistently displaces circulation to the edge. This condition begins at the front door, where the travertine bench occupies the center and the entry is shifted to the side. The circulation system is not entirely without its physical markers; the edge sponsors its own set of structured landmarks that imply the continuity of the path. But the implication is always a ruse; the trajectory of movement loses its singularity in the vicinity of the rooms. The roving subject is misled. Left illegitimately hovering at the periphery of the anteroom, or at the threshold of the marble hall, or at the edge of the dining room, (s)he must either move on or join the interior.

The roving subject appears determined to undermine the sanctity of the dwelling subject with its offside presence and its diagonal gaze. The dwelling subject responds with a kind of spatial amnesia, forgetting its exposed flank. Both positions are summoned by the Loosian *Raumplan*. The architecture rallies equally to the support of each case, and thus the possibility of either condition is eliminated. The interior will eventually trap the rover, and the dweller will always sense a slight breeze.

## DRESSING THE DUAL SUBJECTS

Already in his earliest essays ('Men's Hats', 'Men's Fashion', 'Undergarments', 'The Shoemaker', 'Women's Fashion', 'The English Uniform', 'Footwear'), Loos showed a focused interest in the immediate surfaces that surround the body (2). The obsession with matters of dress was not transitory, nor was it incidental to his architectural work. In fact, Loos moved without qualifiers between clothing and cladding, between what could be called the first and second housings for the body.

2. All but one of these titles are in Newman and Smith's (1987) translation of the collected essays of Loos. 'Die Englische Uniform' is in Loos (1983).



Figures 10 and 11. Villa Müller: A-A and B-B Sections (authors' drawings).

Loos borrowed the theoretical link between these two domains from the writings of Gottfried Semper. Semper claimed that the original wall was the product of the weaver, namely the hanging carpets and fabrics that served to enclose space. Thus a wall consists first and foremost of a surface rather than a structure. Structure was necessary, but 'had nothing directly to do with space and the division of space' (Semper, 1989, 254).

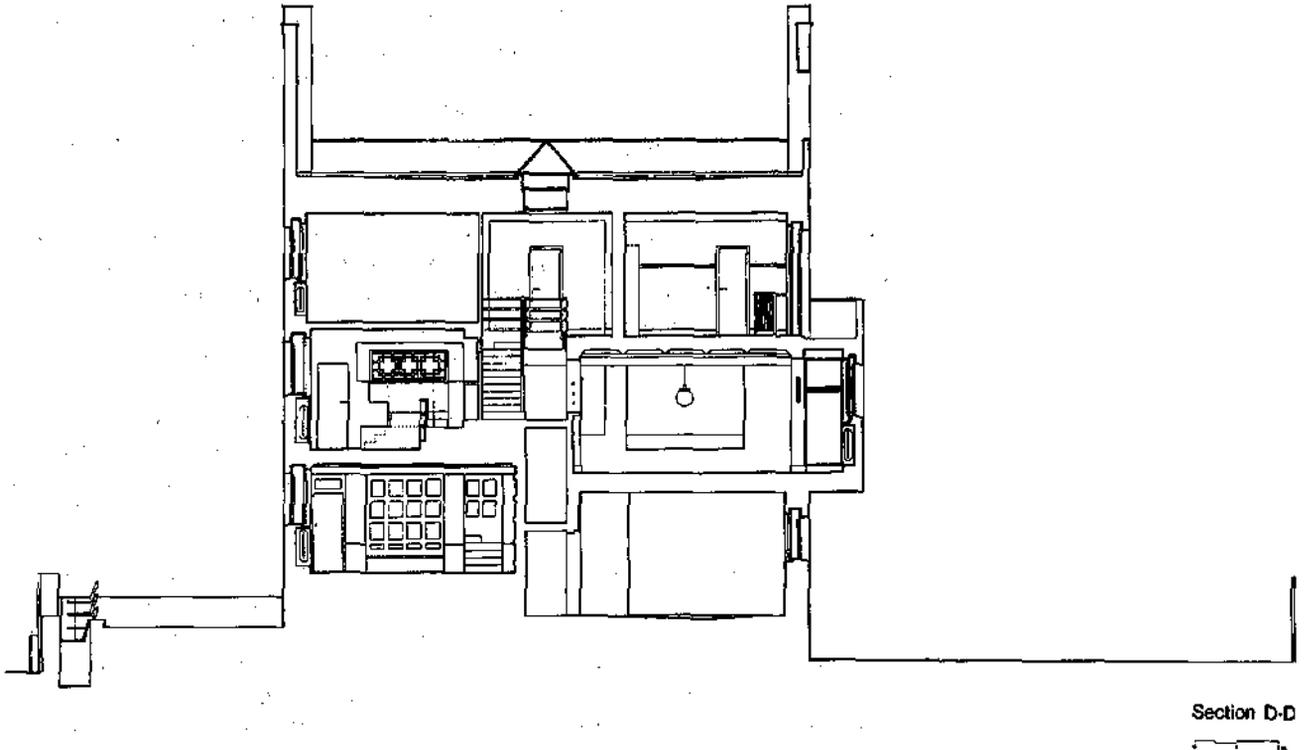
This statement accurately describes the relative status of cladding and structure in Loos's architecture. For both Semper and Loos, enclosure was achieved with membranes, with thin wrappers that encircled and defined an interior space. Loos repeatedly compared the house with the dinner jacket and the analogy is apt. Not only does the jacket form an interior via an act of wrapping, but it is comprised of two one-sided faces: the exterior fabric and the lining. The same is true for Loos's walls. One thinks immediately of the radical split between the white plaster exterior of the villa and the opulent interior, but the split is not limited to the exterior walls. The schism quite logically runs through all the walls. Surfaces belong not to their particular wall section, but to the spaces they face.

Despite the density of the actual construction, the villa is experienced as a sequence of thin wrappers, like slipping in and out of dinner jackets along a coat rack. Lining follows lining. Each spatial unit is distinctively clad. Each room is sheathed in a unique fashion: the Opaxit tile entry, the paneled anteroom, the burlap cloak room, the marble hall, the mahogany dining room, the lemonwood *boudoir*, the wallpapered bedroom, the maple wardrobe for the woman, the oak wardrobe for the man. The discrete, well-defined room served Loos as a stable armature onto which he could unfold, arrange, and attach his chosen material. The seams neatly follow the room's contours and the surface patterns accentuate the underlying geometry. The rooms are, of course, tailor-made for the reclining subject.

But the villa is not constructed solely for the dwelling subject, and as the second subject breezes in, the cladding, like the space, becomes disheveled. The promenade is the opposite of well-dressed. It is strewn with traces of robing and disrobing. The cladding of the roving subject cannot be summarized in a room-by-room manner, for the architecture of the path is consciously denied the condition of discrete interiority. Instead, the circulation system is lined with the intertwined fringes of adjacent materials.

Material overlap is also evident in the individually-clad interiors. The tile flooring of the entry vestibule sweeps beyond the swinging doors into the adjacent anteroom, where the first hint of oak appears, a hint of the upcoming marble hall. The marble itself wanders out-of-bounds, wrapping the lower walls of the *boudoir* and colonizing the perforated edge of the dining room. But nowhere is the presence of the roving subject more poignantly expressed than in the cladding of the low, narrow passage that links the anteroom with the marble hall. This tiny zone (the level portion measures 2.2m x 1.0m) is essentially dressed by the excess materials of the neighboring spaces.

The wood paneling of the anteroom covers most of the vertical surfaces. Wrapping around the corner from the opposite direction is the marble cladding, a 23cm wide vertical strip on either side of the opening, that marks the entry to the main hall like the folded flaps of a tent. The flooring belongs to the marble hall. The white plaster ceiling belongs clearly to the box of the *boudoir* above. It appears that the passage is permeated by a sense of transition, constructed entirely by sheathing spilling out from behind and ahead and above to form enclosure by sheer overlap.



Figures 12 and 13. Villa Müller: D-D Section and View from the Living Room (authors' drawing and photograph).

However, even in this miniscule space, the characteristic dualism of Loos's architecture is present. For the immobile eye, for the eye that momentarily warrants enclosure as the body rotates and pauses at the top of the stairs, for the eye that is transfixed by the symmetrically-framed spectacle that snaps into place like a carefully-laid trap at the top of the stairs, for the eye of the stationary subject, Loos has provided the subtle signs of a bounded interior. First, there are signs on the floor. Rather than being a seamless extension of the floor of the marble hall, the oak strips of the niche are neatly trimmed to form a distinct rectangular pad and the direction of the herringbone pattern has been rotated 90 degrees with respect to the room beyond. There is also an inlaid bar of mahogany and black oak that forms an unmistakable threshold, graphically marking the spatial limit of the space. Also, roughly at eye level, there is a wide band of cladding material that appears nowhere else in the villa, a strip of black wallpaper speckled with blue and green flowers. The paper wraps all four sides of the niche, interrupted only by the opening to the stone hall. It is an announcement acknowledging the status of the niche as a room as well as a corridor, a place and a passage. The dual subjects are, after all, housed in one body.

### THE THINNESS OF LINES

Loosian scholarship has often claimed that through the application of formal analysis (dashed lines crisscrossing over pristine drawings in search of order), the true architectural subject of a work can be 'excavated' and 'brought to the surface'. This approach assumes that the true building is buried within the thickness of the wall, and that the weighty structure, in all its material specificity, is but a coarse shadow of a more meaningful, intrinsic, geometric order. In other words, the assumption has been that a good drawing lurks inside the plump building. But the opposite is true in Villa Müller. Everything is on the surface. The walls have no interiors. They have no centerlines and their thickness is unknowable. The only meaningful lines that exist are the edges of the floors and ceilings, and the perimeter of the building envelope. The only measurements worth noting begin and end at the exposed faces of the cladding.

Loos emphatically rejected the disembodied project of the draftsman/architect as marking the inevitable collapse of building under the weight of the drawn line. Perhaps it will seem surprising that there are many moments of measurable inexactitude in Villa Müller: grids which are quite irregular, symmetries that are quite unequal, centers that are not nearly centered. But these are rallying points of resistance against the seduction of graphic marks:

Drawing board and kiln! A world separates the two. Here the exactitude of the compass, there the indeterminacy of the incidental, the fire, the dreams of mankind, and the mystery of becoming (3).

3. This quotation is from Loos's, 'Keramika' (Loos, 1929, 57).



Figure 14. Villa Müller: Interior (authors' photograph).



Figure 15. Villa Müller: Interior (authors' photograph).



Figure 16. Villa Müller: Interior (authors' photograph).

## ADOLF LOOS'UN MÜLLER EVİ: YENİDEN BİR BAKIŞ

## ÖZET

Alındı : 13. 6. 1995  
Anahtar Sözcükler: Loos, Ev, Raumplan, Rasyonalizm.

Prag'da 1930 yılında inşa edilen Villa Müller'in, Adolf Loos'un *Raumplan* kavramının uygulandığı en son ve en bitmiş yapı olduğuna dair yaygın bir kanı vardır. Ama Villa Müller'i böylesi kalıplaşmış etiketlerle adlandırmadan önce bir durup düşünmek gerekir. Herşeyden önce ne *Raumplan* sözcüğü Loos'un kendisi tarafından kullanılmış ne de kavramsal bir yöntem olarak yazılarında yer almıştır. Uzun bir süre, Loos'un 1929 yılında bir marangoza gönderdiği yazının dip notunda yer alan, 'planın mekanda çözümlenmesi' sözleri, *Raumplan* kavramının tanımı olarak kabul edilmiştir. Daha sonra bu tanım H. Kulka tarafından 'prizmatik kabukla sınırlanmış programın üç boyutlu artikülasyonu' olarak yorumlanmıştır.

Bu yorumlardan yola çıkarak Villa Müller'i sadece 'programın üç boyutlu dışı vurumu' olarak nitelendirilmektedir. Bu yapı aynı zamanda alabildiğine üretken bir çelişkiyi de sergilemektedir. Bu çelişkinin kaynağı *Raumplan*'nın barındırdığı birbiri ile kavramsal olarak yarışan iki nesnedir. Bu nesnelere biri 'duran' öbürü 'devinendir'. İlki 'yarış' ve 'duruşu' ikincisi ise 'ileriye uzanmayı' ve 'yer değiştirmeyi' simgelemektedir. İç mekanın tanımı bu iki nesne arasında gidip gelmektedir. Duran nesnenin mekanı 'oda' ise devinen nesne varlığını villa içinde sürekliliğini koruyan dolaşım çizgisinin mimarisinde bulur.

Loos mimarlık yaşamı boyunca yazılarında 'giydirmek' ve 'kaplamak' sözcüklerini dönüşümlü olarak kullanmıştır. Bu sözcükler arasındaki kavramsal bağlantının kaynağı Gottfried Semper'in yazılarıdır. Semper'e göre, mimari bir eleman olan duvar, varlığını iç mekanı oluşturmak için taşıyıcı elemanlara sarılan halı veya elde dokunmuş kumaşlara borçludur. Bir başka deyişle, duvar yapısal bir eleman olmaktan çok bir yüzey olarak ele alınmıştır. Yapısal sistemin ne mekânın oluşması, ne de bölünmesi ile doğrudan bir ilişkisi yoktur. Evi şık bir akşam ceketine benzeten Loos için de bu görüş geçerlidir. Bir benzetme olarak ceket hem sarıldığı için iç mekânın varlığını, hem de kumaş ve astardan oluştuğu için iki taraflılığı çağırır. Aynı özellikler Loos'un duvar anlayışında da gözlenir. Hatta bu benzetme Loos'un çalışmasında daha da ileriye götürülüp tüm villanın ince, saran gibi davranan yüzeylerden oluştuğu öne sürülebilir. Villa Müller'de vücudu giydirmek ve giydirilmiş vücudu sarıp, barındırmak paralel iki süreç olarak ele alınmıştır.

Başta tartışmaya geri dönüp, duran nesnenin barındığı odayı şık bir akşam yemeği ceketine benzetebilirsek devinen nesnenin, mekânın eklenip üst üste bindirilerek oluşturulmuş yamalı bir astardır denebilir. Giriş holünün seramik kaplamasının bir sonraki odaya geçmesinde, mermer yüzeylerin dolaşım mekânlarından salonlara akışında malzemelerin üst üste binmişliği vurgulanır.

Loos'un görüşleri ile yönelen mimarlık öğretisi, mimarinin ana temasının biçimsel analizin uygulanması ile yüzeye çıkabileceğini savunmaktadır. Bu yaklaşım gerçek mimarlığın duvarların kalınlığında var olduğunu ve yapı sisteminin tüm maddesel özellikleri ile geometrik bir düzenin gölgesi olamayacağını ileri sürmektedir. Bir başka deyişle, ağırlığı olan bir yapının içinde iyi bir mimari çizim gizlidir. Ama Villa Müller için bunun tam tersi geçerlidir. Bu yapıda herşey yüzeydedir. Duvarın içi yoktur ve kalınlıkları belirsizdir. Loos, her ne kadar çizimin cazibesine karşı koymaya çalışmışsa da, Villa Müller'deki tek anlamlı ve ölçülebilir çizgiler tavanda, yer döşemesinde, yapının dış çerçevesinde ve kaplamasında görülebilir.

## REFERENCES

- KULKA, H. (1931) *Adolf Loos: Das Werk des Architekten*, Anton Schroll Verlag, Vienna.
- LHOTA, K. (1933) *Arkitekt Adolf Loos*, *Arkitekt SLA* (32) Prague.
- LOOS, A. (1929) *Josef Veillich*, in *Trotzdem*, Georg Prachner Verlag, Vienna.
- LOOS, A. (1983) *Die Potemkinische Stadt*, Georg Prachner Verlag, Vienna.
- NEWMAN, J. O., SMITH, J. H. *trans.* (1987) *Adolf Loos, Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays 1897-1900*, Opposition Books, MIT Press, New York.
- SEMPER, G. (1989) *The Four Elements of Architecture*, H. F. Mallgrave and W. Hermann, *trans.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- VAN DUZER, L., KLEINMAN, K. (1994) *Villa Müller: A Work of Adolf Loos*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York.